



# MEMORIAL

FROM THE

**Board of Levee Commissioners**

OF THE

**STATE OF LOUISIANA,**

IN BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF SAID STATE,

TO THE

**CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES,**

ASKING NATIONAL AID AND ASSISTANCE IN THE  
RECONSTRUCTION OF LEVEES ON THE  
MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

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NEW ORLEANS:

PRINTED AT THE NEW ORLEANS "TIMES" BOOK AND JOB OFFICE.

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4/24/53  
S. 300.

## MEMORIAL.

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*To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States :*

The members of the Board of Levee Commissioners of the State of Louisiana, most respectfully represent to the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, that the levees of the Mississippi and its outlets, together with its tributaries, the Arkansas and Red rivers, were, previous to the late war, maintained at an immense outlay of labor and money—in some parishes by the riparian proprietors, and in others by a system of self-imposed taxes on those who cultivated the alluvial lands, and were directly benefited by the expenditure. Although these measures were adopted during a time of general prosperity, when labor was abundant and cheap, yet even under these advantageous circumstances every year of high water was accompanied by numerous crevasses, which devastated a large area of cultivated land. During the war, the levees suffered greatly from neglect and the diversion of labor from those objects to which it had been previously applied : the evil increased with time, and at the return of peace vast sections of the most fertile and productive land were left subject to inundation.

Those interested in planting, foreseeing the necessity of an early reparation of the levees, met in convention, to deliberate on the best plan to effect the desired object, and the result of this meeting was the formation of a Board of Levee Commissioners, appointed provisionally by Gov. Wells, and afterwards legalized by the State Legislature. This circumstance brought about a general conviction of the necessity of entrusting this great interest, not to the whims and fancies of individuals, but to disinterested parties, (under legislative control,) who would devise some general system for the protection of the low lands, and now, for the first time since the settlement of the country, the State has taken charge of the levees. An examination of the gigantic undertaking allotted to them, the limited means at their disposal, and the short time which would elapse before the rise of the rivers, satisfied the Commissioners that these means were not sufficient to accomplish, in time, the work actually necessary to repair the breaches in the levees.

Under these circumstances they applied to the general Government for such assistance in men and money as would enable them to protect the country from overflow. To these applications promises were made that gladdened the hearts of the whole agricultural community ; and already in prospect, they not only saw their dwellings protected from the angry waters, but surrounded by thrifty crops and all the accessories of well-ordered plantations ; even those who were distrustful as to Government assistance, yielded their faith to these promises when they learned that the Secretary of War had sent Major General Humphreys, a gentleman not only of high standing as an engineer, but with a great and well deserved reputation for his knowledge of the Mississippi, to superintend the repairs at some of the largest crevasses.

He came, and saw, but did not conquer. From causes unknown to your petitioners, means were not forthcoming to carry out the programme, and we were thrown back on our own resources to save as much of the country as we could. Some of the largest works which had been selected by Gen. Humphreys as the scene of Government enterprise were left untouched until a late date, under the expectation of Government assistance; when the question was finally settled, that no help was to be obtained from that quarter, the works were put under contract; but precious time had been lost, not to be regained; the rise of the river found these levees in an unfinished state, notwithstanding the almost superhuman efforts of the contractors to keep ahead of the water.

The results can be easily anticipated, though the river had not attained its usual height, yet the levees yielded to the pressure, and we are now witnessing the same destruction of crops and stock which brought misery and starvation on so many families last year.

The water is now pouring through the Bass Levee, the Morganza and Grand Levees in Point Coupee, and the Chinn and Robertson Levees in West Baton Rouge. All of these openings except the first mentioned\* were closed, and the levees partly built—the State having spent thousands of dollars for the work already done. Of the sums expended, heavy losses must ensue either to the contractors or State; for it will be found when the waters recede, that the earth recently thrown up has been carried off to the adjacent swamps, and the whole work will have to be commenced *de novo*.

An examination of the map will show that the waters flowing through the above-mentioned crevasses seriously affect the whole basin, commencing at the Arkansas line, bounded on the west by the Red river, and on the south by Bayou Lafourche, embracing the finest cotton and cane lands in the State. The political economist might dwell on the loss to the country and the world of the millions worth of the earth's products which have been destroyed; but that loss weighs lightly in comparison with the untold misery inflicted on thousands of families, who are suddenly forced to abandon their homes, and the comforts accumulated about them, rushing they know not whither, to seek a refuge among those living on higher lands, but almost as destitute as themselves.

This was the case last year, when they still had some credit and a little money left of the savings of former years; now they have literally nothing to recommence their work, and in utter despair will be forced to seek a miserable support among those whose means and whose charity are alike exhausted.

There is no doubt in the minds of your petitioners that these evils can be obviated by building embankments of sufficient base and height to resist the water, and the only question that remains to be solved is in reference to the means necessary to defray the cost. It is equally clear that the levee system, to be entirely successful, should be placed under the control of the general Government, not only because it has ample means, but also because one uniform system would be adopted, extending from Cairo to the Balize, and the levees located by officers not under the influence of private persons, would perform their entire duty, irrespective of individual interests.

The superintendence on the part of the general Government would give a sense of security to the settlers on the low lands hitherto unknown, and cause an influx of emigrants, who would speedily bring into cultivation millions of acres, which under present circumstances must remain idle for years to come. There is yet another reason why this matter should be taken in hand by the general Government. It has a direct pecuniary interest in the amount of cotton and sugar produced, as the basis of financial operations, and the prolific source whence must be drawn a large portion of the money to liquidate the interest and principal of the national debt. The State of Louisiana, under different circumstances, would hesitate to call for aid in the management of her internal affairs; but necessity cannot afford to be prudish, and it is very apparent that the impoverished condition of the taxpayers renders any charge beyond the mere support of the Government in the most economical form a heavy burden. It must also be borne in mind, that the State derived the greatest portion of her revenues from the section of the country now rendered desolate, and so long as these overflows continue, she will be deprived of the revenues which the lands would yield under cultivation. It must also be recollected, that by the change in her system of labor, these lands can only be restored to their former productiveness by the introduction of additional laborers. In the present state of uncertainty in regard to the levees, no emigrants will settle on these lands, however fertile, nor will capitalists go there with hired labor.

If the general Government can appropriate millions to enable parties to transport with safety the products of different States, finding their way to the markets of the world through this same river, why cannot an appropriation be made to confine its waters within its banks?

The main object of a government is to benefit its citizens, and no other channel offers itself through which so much good can be conferred on the inhabitants of this valley, as by the expenditure of money for this object.

The sum to be expended would be small in comparison with the magnificent results that would be obtained, and the Government would receive a direct and immediate return for the outlay by a large increase of its revenue. In asking assistance from the general Government, (although convinced that this work should be under their care) we do not wish it to be understood, that we are to become its stipendiaries for a period reaching beyond a time when we shall be able to help ourselves.

The levees being once properly built and maintained for a few years, confidence in the security afforded will return, and a population will be attracted to these fertile lands amply able to maintain what the government has inaugurated.

The alluvial lands of the State, formed by the sedimentary accretions of the Mississippi and its tributaries, occupy at least one fourth of the area of the State. These lands are traversed by a network of bayous, lakes and swamps; many of these have been converted into arable fields by means of levees, and rendered productive by ditching. It is upon this soil the great agricultural system of the State has been developed with such brilliant results, in the production of the great staples of cotton, sugar and rice. A statistical table of the products of this section has been compiled from reliable data, furnished the Auditor of Public Accounts, as to the results of the crops of 1859. (Vide Statistical Table.)

It will be seen that twenty-one parishes produced in the year 1859, two hundred and ninety-four thousand and forty-four bales of cotton, eight millions one hundred and fifty-nine thousand five hundred and forty-eight bushels of corn, two hundred and sixty-nine thousand eight hundred and twenty eight hogsheads of sugar, three hundred and eighty-eight thousand six hundred and fifty-five barrels of molasses, and twenty-six thousand four hundred and seventy-seven barrels of rice, on a body of land not exceeding eight hundred and seventy-six thousand two hundred and forty-nine acres—to say nothing of a long list of other products not enumerated, which find their way to market, and contribute to the grand total of our internal commerce.

It will also be seen, by reference to the table, that there are three parishes (besides that of Orleans), from which no returns are given, two of which—St. John the Baptist and Jefferson—are sugar growing; and in that portion of St. Landry subject to inundation a large amount of cotton is raised.

The levees on the great river and its outlets afford direct protection to this whole section, which without them would, in a few years, relapse into its original wilderness. After the flood of last year a careful estimate was made of the losses sustained by the partial overflow of the western portion of the parish of Assumption, and it was found to exceed six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, though but few of the large sugar plantations suffered to a great extent, and three thousand persons were driven from their homes.

The products mentioned were raised when the country was prosperous and its labor undisturbed. One of the most essential elements necessary for the production of the same crops (the rich soil) is still left, and with a sufficiency of labor and protection from overflow, there is no doubt that even greater crops can be produced.

It is true that the same profits will be henceforth divided between the employer and the employees, but the revenue resulting to the government will be the same. To attract and secure this labor, the country must be rendered safe by a permanent and well devised levee system, so that capital will be required to incur only the ordinary risks of the season.

In the foregoing calculation the Red river bottoms have been omitted, where levees are equally necessary, though secondary in point of size and cost. Yet, under present circumstances, they will prove a heavy tax to the State, and their maintenance will add greatly to the heavy burdens already imposed for levee and other purposes.

In seeking assistance, we conceive that we have an equitable claim on the Government. First, on the score of the damage inflicted on the levees during the war, under the plea of military necessity. Secondly, by their direct pecuniary interest in the maintenance of the levees; and thirdly, the protection due to a people who pay taxes and are unable to help themselves; and finally, on another ground, which seems to call loudly for the consideration of Congress—the large number of freedmen out of employment by the unfortunate overflow. Thirteen parishes are now almost altogether desolated. These parishes had, at the census of 1860, one hundred and eighteen thousand one hundred and fifty-four (118,154) slaves, and three thousand nine hundred and fifty-seven (3,957) free colored persons; and even others are also

partly affected, whose colored population reached about fifty thousand colored people. The whole State includes only forty-nine parishes, all more or less dependent on the levees—inhabited, by the census of 1860, by 357,629 whites, 18,647 free colored, and 331,726 slaves. These people, with the exception of those who have been victims of the results of the war, yet reside and work in that portion of the State, and all of them (the colored people particularly) depend on the crops for subsistence and support.

The present state of the country, brought about by the giving way of the levees, leaves these freedmen in a condition worse, if possible, than their white neighbors and employers. Helpless and without means, their condition calls loudly for some permanent form of relief, which will secure to them constant work and support, which can only be insured by a system of levees, so constructed and managed as to give certain protection.

The remarks of your petitioners have been confined to the levee system under their immediate supervision, and if they have omitted to speak of the entire section above our State line, it was not from any want of a due appreciation of its importance, but from the fact that an exposition of the wants of our section, will suffice to call attention to the whole subject, and will prompt the parties immediately interested to make their wants known, and place before you reliable statistics, which will have more weight with your honorable bodies than any arguments we might advance in their behalf.

The State, crippled as she is in her resources, is still making herculean efforts to protect her citizens, but the impoverished condition of her treasury, the low state of her credit, (brought about by the overthrow of her system of labor,) and the loss of revenue from the overflowed lands, have operated greatly to her detriment in the sale of bonds issued for levee purposes; and although we deem the levee system of sufficient importance to be placed under the charge of the general Government, yet we only ask for such assistance as will build up and maintain our levees until such time as our industry can restore the finances of the State to their former condition, and our alluvial lands become the homes of an energetic and thrifty population.

With a prayer for all and general relief to the people of Louisiana, your petitioners bring this memorial to a close.

J. V. DURALDE, Chairman.  
F. L. CLAIBORNE,  
W. S. BRISCOE,  
F. M. GOODRICH,  
EFFINGHAM LAWRENCE,  
E. E. KITTRIDGE,  
WM. J. MINOR,  
A. W. WALKER,  
EDWARD SPARROW,  
W. D. WINTER.

RUFFIN C. BARROW,  
THOMAS J. DECKER,  
A. D. M. HARRALSON,  
H. P. MORANCY,  
W. W. PUGH,  
J. G. OSGOOD,  
J. B. TREPAGNIER,  
A. T. WELCH,  
W. M. WILSON,

*Composing Board of Levee Commissioners  
of the State of Louisiana.*

Parishes.	Land Cultivated.	Bales of Cotton.	Hhds. of Sugar.	Bbls. of Molasses.	Bushels of Corn.	Bbls. of Rice.
Carroll .....	80,522	37,475	.....	.....	461,195	
Madison .....	79,909	35,718	.....	.....	523,810	
Concordia .....	76,013	51,493	.....	.....	506,900	
Tensas .....	101,940	81,279	.....	.....	670,400	
Washita .....	33,587	13,109	.....	.....	248,525	
Morehouse .....	23,584	17,923	.....	.....	363,301	
Catahoula .....	38,761	22,969	.....	.....	327,695	
Avoyelles .....	46,966	14,169	5,741	11,185	971,846	305
Pointe Coupee .....	65,069	17,079	14,895	24,948	525,240	
West Baton Rouge .....	.....	1,092	21,459	34,318	260,370	
Iberville .....	56,548	720	38,762	61,521	559,700	
St. Landry .....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	
St. Martin .....	27,017	2,893	9,919	10,968	179,300	
St. Mary .....	26,000	80	41,628	55,102	337,800	
Ascension .....	35,439	246	24,437	30,642	517,730	
Assumption .....	47,967	621	31,446	44,454	455,850	88
Lafourche .....	16,497	.....	8,880	13,259	126,400	982
Terrebonne .....	32,387	178	18,820	30,515	276,704	1,182
St. James .....	41,379	.....	27,000	38,691	665,640	
St. John .....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	
St. Charles .....	16,400	.....	8,294	12,115	41,450	2,220
Jefferson .....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	
Orleans .....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	
St. Bernard .....	10,264	.....	6,014	6,033	58,850	
Plaquemines .....	.....	.....	12,533	14,804	80,842	22,000
Total .....	876,249	294,044	269,828	388,655	8,159,548	26,477

Value of 294,044 bales Cotton, @ \$120 per bale .....	\$35,285,280
“ 8,159,548 bushels of Corn, @ \$1 per bushel .....	8,159,548
“ 269,828 hhds. Sugar, @ \$170 per hhd. ....	45,870,760
“ 388,655 barrels Molasses, @ \$1 per gallon .....	15,546,200
“ 26,477 barrels Rice, @ \$30 per barrel .....	794,310
	\$105,656,098



# APPENDIX.

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## MEMORIAL OF THE LEVEE COMMISSION.

The following memorial, presented by Senator Gibson, was laid over under the rules :

*To the President of the Senate and Speaker of the House of Representatives  
of the General Assembly of the State of Louisiana :*

The undersigned, a committee on behalf of the Board of Levee Commissioners for the State, organized and appointed provisionally by His Excellency the Governor, and in obedience to a resolution of the Board, have the honor to submit to the Legislature the following memorial and recommendations on the subject of the levees.

They design, in a very few words, to show the magnitude of the interests at stake, and the absolute and pressing necessity of providing at once the means for completing and extending the levees, and of securing to the administration of the whole system, economy, fidelity and intelligence.

It was found by the earliest European settlers of Louisiana that the country was subject to overflow, and one of the first objects which engaged their most serious attention was to devise measures to give security to their habitations. When the population had increased, and the area of occupation was pushed from the higher to the lower lands, until it encroached upon parts of the country which were inundated every year ; when vast resources had been developed and wealth accumulated, towns and cities established, and the borders of the Mississippi and all the other streams laid out in gardens and plantations, it was discovered that those individual efforts, which had been sufficient for the protection of scanty settlements on the most favored locations, were wholly inadequate to meet the necessities of large and wealthy communities for more certain guarantees against disastrous invasions of the floods.

Hence, the whole subject was of necessity referred to the State Government. It was but right that the Government should be charged with a matter involving the welfare of the whole people, and which had grown to be beyond the reach and control of private or parochial enterprise.

Although another plan had been often urged, and with much force, yet the present levee system has been adhered to from the beginning, and upon its efficiency depends to-day the property of more than three-fourths of the people of the State. So, that whatever might be our opinion of the correctness of the theory upon which the outlet system is founded, we think every consideration of interest and of humanity demand that no departure be made for the present from the system which we

find has so long been established. Nor can we see how the opposite plan can just now be successfully coupled as an auxiliary to the other. It would be necessary to levee both sides of the outlets from the river all the way to the Gulf, else all the country contiguous to them would be overflowed. We observed that, during the past year, when the crevasses broke near the network of great lakes and bayous, opening directly to the Gulf, in Western Louisiana, they were found to be wholly unequal to the office of discharging the vast volume of water, and nearly all the adjacent country was submerged to a greater extent and for a longer time than ever before; while after a very short period no sensible effect was produced upon the surface of the river; and, yet, this was the result, though at other points, on both sides of the river, a larger portion of the levees had given way than was ever known at any previous time. More than twenty miles of levee was destroyed in this State on the Mississippi alone. The lateral discharges through all these numerous and extensive breaks, along the whole river in the alluvial region, vast as they were, failed to be followed by that depression of its surface which had been anticipated.

In spite of all breaks or outlets, the water rose to its maximum height, and continued high until an extraordinarily late period, and the damage inflicted upon the country was almost incalculable. But even if we had sufficient data, we do not deem it necessary to attempt an elaborate or exhaustive discussion of the two systems. We aim on this occasion merely to show the great scale upon which the present system is based, and how hazardous it would be, either to neglect or to depart from it hastily. The Mississippi river, (the outlet to the sea of more than fifteen hundred streams,) which, from its immense size, must possess phenomena peculiar to itself, flows for five hundred and sixty-five miles through the centre of the State. We have also Red river, the Ouachita, the Atchafalaya, Plaquemine, the Lafourche, besides other smaller streams, all of which contribute to increase the hazards of overflow, and against which the population have used levees as safeguards. There are within the State about fifteen hundred miles of levees, erected at the cost of about five millions of dollars. This is an approximate estimate. The following parishes, eighteen in number, are of delta or recent alluvial formation, and subject to overflow throughout every portion of their territory, to-wit: Carroll, Madison, Tensas, Concordia, Point Coupee, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, Ascension, Assumption, Lafourche, Terrebonne, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, Orleans, St. Bernard, Plaquemine, Jefferson. Estimating the entire territory of the State at 45,000 square miles, or 28,800,000 acres, they comprise one-fourth of the whole State. By the census of 1860, the total population of the State was 708,002; that of the eighteen parishes enumerated over 391,916—more than one-half. By Champomier's tables of 1859, of 362,296 hhd. sugar produced by the State, these parishes yielded 241,484 hhd., about two-thirds of the whole amount. They produced also a proportionate quantity of molasses. They grew also one half of the whole cotton crop. In 1860, the total value of property in the State was \$460,365,130, and the amount of taxes assessed was \$1,779,019. In these eighteen delta parishes, the total amount of property was \$294,031,975, and the amount of taxes assessed was \$1,187,824 73. Thus it will be seen that this district possessed about two-thirds of the whole value of

property of the State, and paid about three-fourths of the taxes of the entire State. See tabular statement marked A.

But this is not all. The following eighteen parishes are partially subject to inundation, and require, more or less, the protection of levees, viz: Avoyelles, Bossier, Caddo, Caldwell, Catahoula, De Soto, East Baton Rouge, Franklin, Lafayette, Morehouse, Natchitoches, Rapides, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, Vermillion, Ouachita, West Feliciana. They contain 18,491 square miles, or 11,854,240 acres, and 230,256 inhabitants. They produced in 1860, 110,090 bhd. of sugar, with a proportionate quantity of molasses, over 312,310 bales of cotton, and more than 6,652,606 bushels of corn. The total value of property in them was \$138,216,524, and the amount of taxes assessed was \$458,464 40. See tabular statement marked B.

Such are the immense interests, in a great measure, dependent for their safety upon the levees in this State, and such is the extent to which, from small beginnings, the work has already been carried.

The adjoining States of Arkansas and Mississippi are interested, only less than Louisiana, in the stability of the levee system, while even Tennessee and Missouri, in a small measure, look to it for protection. The aggregate interests within reach of the floods of the Mississippi river, and liable to be destroyed, are so great as to raise the levee system from a local or State question to be of national concern. Whether we regard the area of country, the number of people, the value of property, the amount of commerce and trade, or whether we reflect upon the immeasurable evils to be provided against, or the illimitable good to be effected, or whether we contrast the whole with other objects elsewhere, which have received the unstinted assistance of the Federal Government, we are profoundly impressed with the superior and irresistible claims of this great interest upon the justice and liberality of that Government. We will not rest these claims upon the present crippled condition of these States, with treasury empty, with labor disorganized and demoralized, with exhausted resources and an utterly impoverished population, nor upon the fact that some of the most important breaches were made for military purposes by Federal commanders. The grounds already mentioned would seem to be sufficient to secure the favorable consideration of the Federal Government.

But however this may be, the peculiar situation of Louisiana was such as to admit of no delay. The evils afflicting her would become more and more aggravated, and in a short period irremediable. Prompt and decided action alone could save her. It was a question not merely of interest, but of life or death. The Governor of the State felt the responsibility of the emergency, and hastened to assume it. Under his instructions, and after careful examination, the Levee Commissioners appointed by him have entered into contracts with responsible parties to repair all the breaches made during the four past years. These were more than twenty miles in extent, and the cost of reconstruction will amount to two million dollars. Every precaution was taken to secure the early execution of these contracts, and we have every reason to believe, from their character for energy, intelligence and ability, the men who have undertaken this work, sensible of its importance, faithful to their engagements, will press it forward so as to secure the State against overflow next year. The proceed-



ings of the Board have been regularly kept by a Secretary, who is not a member, whose services have been valuable to the Board, and his labors arduous, and we deem it but an act of justice to recommend that the Legislature provide liberally for his compensation. All the material portion of the proceedings of the Board have been published, and the entire proceedings will be laid before your body, if required. In this connection, we would also present the claims of Mr. J. W. Burke, the Engineer appointed by His Excellency Governor Wells, to make the preliminary surveys and estimates of the cost of the levees to be built and repaired. Commencing at Carrollton, and with ambulance and horses generously furnished him by Major Gen. Canby, he traveled the whole coast to the Arkansas line, and it was from his report the Board obtained the data on which they proceeded to let out the work. He undertook this exposed and laborious duty on the promise of the Governor that he should be paid, and we believe it is only necessary to mention these facts to cause the proper action by the Legislature toward a liberal compensation for his services, or to ratify the agreement made by the Governor with him.

In conclusion, we would respectfully recommend to the Legislature—

1st. The creation of two Boards of Levee Commissioners, to consist of — members, to be appointed by the Governor for — years. One Board to have the control and supervision of the levees below the mouth of Red River, and the other Board to have the control of all levees above that line. Each district to have a Chief Engineer, to be selected by the Board, and to be commissioned by the Governor; the Engineers to have the right to appoint such assistants (with the sanction of the Board) as circumstances may render necessary.

2. The authority for locating and building levees to be given to the Board; the minimum distance from the bank of the Mississippi to be fixed by them, according to some settled rule.

3. The authority to be given to the Governor to issue State bonds, not exceeding — millions of dollars, the proceeds of the same, together with the sums derived from the sale of swamp lands, to be set apart and to be used exclusively for the construction and repair of levees; the said bonds to be secured by a special tax to be imposed on the lands protected from overflow, and to draw an annual interest of — per annum, payable semi-annually, and the principal payable in — years.

4. Each Levee District shall be entitled to the fund raised by taxation on the lands protected by its levees; but the funds derived from the sale of swamp lands should be equally divided.

THOMAS GIBSON, Chairman;

W. W. PUGH,

W. D. WINTER.

I certify that at a meeting of the Board of Levee Commissioners, held in the Governor's office on the 28th of November—present, J. V. Duralde, Chairman; Tobias Gibson, W. W. Pugh, W. J. Minor, R. J. Barrow, A. T. Welch, W. D. Winter, A. W. Walker, and Thos. J. Decker—the foregoing memorial and recommendations were read and unanimously adopted.

N. C. SNETHEN, Secretary.